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Statement submitted by Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, Inc., a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

The Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, Inc. invests in grassroots initiatives driven by women and girls in developing economies that sustainably advance their lives. Through flexible funding, we support economic development and empowerment of women and girls, while accompanying our grantee partners on their journey towards sustainability and greater impact. Over half of our grantee partners historically have focused on economic development and empowerment of women and girls.

It is evident to us from our grant making experience spanning over 49 years, funding nearly 700 projects in 94 countries and reaching more than one million women and girls, that gender equality, women's economic empowerment and social protection are intrinsically linked. Without effective social protection policies and programs in place to address the risks and vulnerabilities specific to women, especially marginalized women in both urban and rural communities, achieving gender equality will remain unattainable. Social protection programs are crucial to women's economic empowerment as it gives them the ability to access labour markets, address risks faced by working families during times of economic down turns and natural disasters and meet the basic needs of poor families.

More than half a billion women have joined the world's work force over the past 30 years, yet the systems and policies in place fall short of providing the necessary support they need to gain the skill sets and education to advance in their careers in a safe and decent work environment, while fulfilling the responsibilities of unpaid care work as care takers of their children and elderly family members. Women in rural communities face the added disadvantage of working in the informal sector and not benefiting from the contributory schemes available in the formal sector. They comprise 43 per cent of the world's agriculture labour force and are the backbone of development in their economies yet do not have control over land and productive services, are not able to generate enough income from their agricultural production to fund the education and health care needs for themselves and their families or save sufficient financial resources for future needs or to grow their micro enterprises.

It is important to reiterate here that the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda for Financing for Development includes a strong commitment to "deliver social protection and essential public services for all" and "eradicate poverty in all its forms everywhere". Toward that end, Member States agreed to "provide fiscally sustainable and nationally appropriate social protection systems, including floors" that focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized among us (Addis Ababa Action Agenda, paragraph 12). Coverage gaps in social protection due to lack of financial resources available to national governments is frequently identified as an impediment to providing Universal Social Protection, including floors. Financial resources are definitely available, provided there is the political will to put in place efficient administrative systems with checks and balances to increase domestic tax revenues by curtailing tax evasion, tax avoidance, tax fraud and illicit financial flows as well as transition to a system of progressive taxation.

Ensuring women have equal access to public services and sustainable infrastructure would increase job opportunities, close the gender pay gap, and reduce barriers that hold women back from reaching their full potential due to discriminatory laws and unfair share of caring for the family. Governments are responsible for providing access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for all of their citizens, including women and girls. Yet, many of the governments of countries, where we fund grants, face allegations of public corruption, lack of financial resources, and sometimes conflict, which reduces their ability to deliver on these

responsibilities. Our grantees — grassroots women-led organizations — often fill gaps in their communities (either where services are completely lacking, or where they fail to appropriately reach women and girls). Governments should be engaging directly with grassroots women's groups, who are already finding solutions to these issues in their communities, to make timely and targeted interventions and collaborate on programs to improve access.

Our grantee in Kenya, Community Mobilization for Positive Empowerment, is working to ensure safe water access in West Uyoma shared, "When women don't have clean water, they are limited in what they can do to empower themselves or their communities. The amount of time that is lost walking to get water, or being sick from dirty water, or caring for children who are sick from dirty water — all of this time adds up and it keeps women from attending community meetings, opening business, seeking leadership roles, and more." For many of the women and girls we support, poor infrastructure means that they are spending inordinate time on unpaid work like fetching water, firewood, and walking long distances on foot to access basic necessities. They have less time for income generating activities and continuing education, which, in turn, perpetuates poverty and exclusion.

In light of the above, on behalf of our grantees, Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, Inc. makes the following recommendations to advance social protection, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure:

- As contributory schemes only benefit women in the formal sector and not those in the informal sector, a sector with a higher concentration of female employment, incidence of unemployment, and poverty, government guarantees of Universal Social Protection, including floors would ensure that the most marginalized do not get left behind.
- Additionally, it is important to expand Universal Social Protection coverage to benefit those who fall outside the agreed upon definitions of "universal", such as refugees, migrants and the stateless.
- Social protection administration systems should be simplified and designed in such a manner that those in rural communities do not have to complete complex processes and forms to receive cash transfers.
- Expand financial inclusion strategies, such as mobile banking, to all rural communities so that women in these communities do not have to travel far and stand in long lines to collect cash transfers. Provide financial literacy and numeracy training to ensure women have the necessary skill sets to manage their finances.
- Many women in rural communities and their children may not meet the conditions of social protection schemes (such as when a disabled child is unable to attend school, a condition of receiving the cash transfer). With the premise that social protection is a human right and that women in rural communities have the same rights as everyone else to thrive, options for non-conditional transfers should be considered.
- Ensure that austerity measures that are taken after a crisis do not impact social security spending, as the protection is essential for people to survive the aftermaths.
- Ensure that social protection system administrators not only have the capacity and the skill sets to collect reliable gender disaggregated data to make targeted interventions, but also receive sensitivity trainings to treat recipients with respect.

- Adequate levels of social protection schemes across the life cycle is important to address the situations that arise at every stage of life.
- While private sector financing is used to fund public goods through Public Private Partnerships, national government's role and ability to monitor and evaluate the projects on behalf of its citizens should not get diluted.
- Gender dimensions and location must be taken into account when designing infrastructure projects to ensure women who carry heavy loads of goods for sale can easily access those services to free up time for economic activity and are safe while using these services any time of the day.
- Move away from gender stereotyped job recruitment by implementing infrastructure work and training opportunities for women as both skilled and semi-skilled workers, while ensuring that, in this male-dominated industry, women feel safe from sexual harassment and gender-based violence and discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes.
- In developing infrastructure designs, it is key to identify women's infrastructure needs in consultation with them and include them in decision making roles.

In conclusion, we have an opportunity to make transformational change in the lives of women and girls everywhere. It is time for Governments to act more effectively by taking a gendered approach to filling the gaps in social protection systems, public services, and sustainable infrastructure.